VITAMINS, MINERALS AND SUPPLEMENTS

Study: Efficacy and information drive sales

By Joseph Tarnowski, VP of Content, ECRM

Consumers buy diet, vitamin and sports nutrition products for a variety of reasons, such as losing weight, providing energy for working out or preventing colds, but regardless of their wellness needs or goals, efficacy is the most important factor in driving sales of these products; they must believe that the products they buy in this category are contributing to these goals. And information and education are major factors in helping them to formulate those beliefs, according to a recent study by ECRM and HellaWella, a consumer-healthy living website owned by Lebhar-Friedman.

The study, based on a survey of more than 450 participants, examined how consumers, who are part of today's healthy lifestyle culture, perceive diet, vitamin and supplement products from a wellness standpoint, and how these perceptions drive their shopping behavior. HellaWella (HellaWella.com — which provides news, research, product reviews and lifestyle tips for consumers interested in healthy and sustainable living) surveyed its audience this past December on how they shopped for vitamins, minerals and supplements.

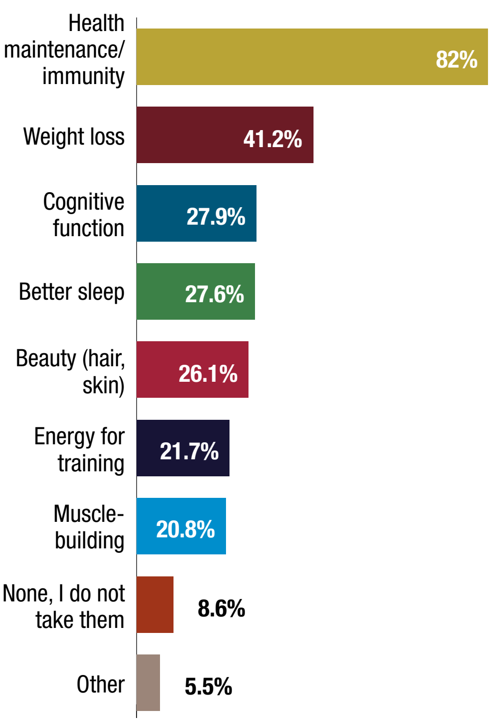
What this research drove home is the importance of content; users of products in this category are constantly seeking information in the form of detailed product information on packaging, articles, case studies and reviews online and in print media, and advice from their peers and experts in the health industry. Those brands and retailers that can provide this information via strong content that engages these shoppers will have the best chance of driving sales in the category.

Wellness goals

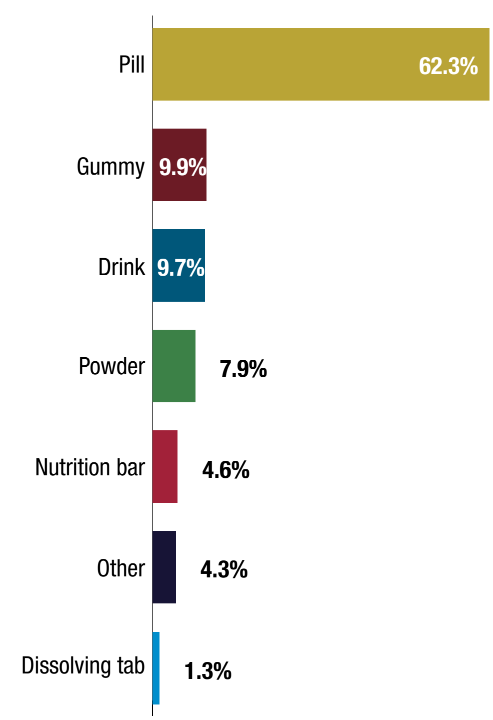
According to those surveyed, health maintenance and immunity were by far the top wellness goals they supported with vitamins and supplements, cited by more than 82% of respondents. This includes disease prevention, improvement of cardiovascular health, reduction of joint pain/osteoporosis and maintaining good eyesight. Additionally, many consumers with maintenance goals are taking vitamins to complement an existing prescription regimen.

Weight loss was the second most mentioned goal, named by 41% of those surveyed — not too surprising considering the obesity epidemic in the United States. For retailers, shoppers with weight loss as a goal are worth paying particular attention to, according to many health experts, as they can evolve into consumers of other types of supplements

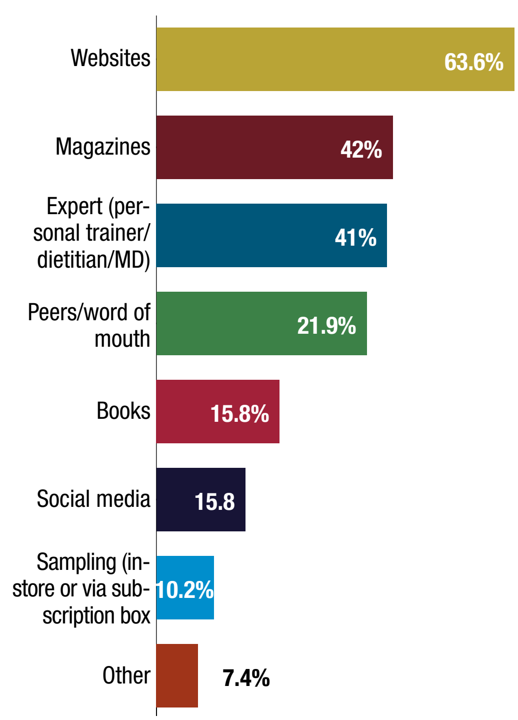
WHAT HEALTH-AND-WELLNESS GOALS DO YOU SUPPORT WITH DIET, VITAMIN AND SPORTS NUTRITION PRODUCTS?



WHAT IS YOUR PREFERRED WAY TO TAKE DIET, VITAMIN AND SPORTS NUTRITION PRODUCTS?



HOW DO YOU USUALLY LEARN ABOUT DIET, VITAMIN AND SPORTS NUTRITION PRODUCTS?



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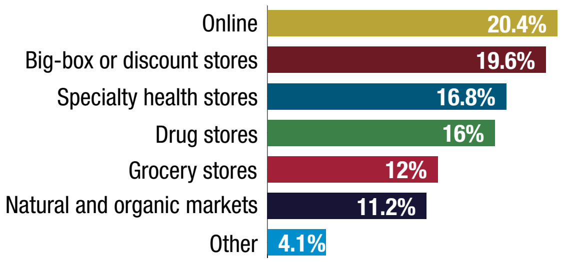
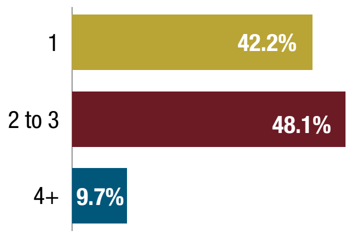
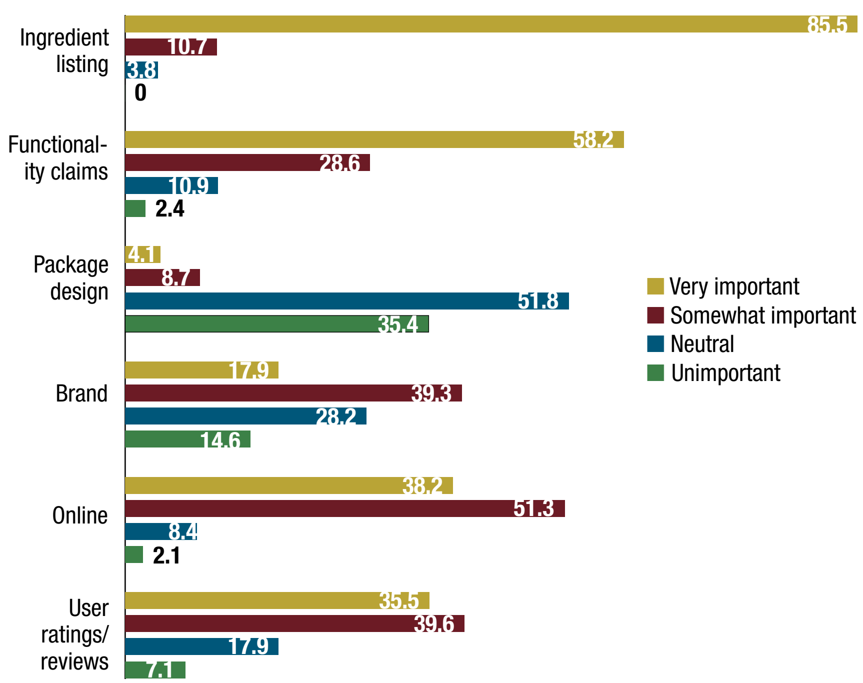
WHERE DO YOU PRIMARILY SHOP FOR DIET, VITAMIN AND SPORTS NUTRITION PRODUCTS?



HOW MANY DIET, VITAMIN AND SPORTS NUTRITION ITEMS DO YOU TYPICALLY PURCHASE IN ONE TRIP?



HOW INFLUENTIAL ARE THE FOLLOWING IN YOUR DECISION TO PURCHASE DIET, VITAMIN AND SPORTS NUTRITION PRODUCTS?



Source: ECRM. hellawella

as their healthier lifestyles progress. For example, these consumers may initially begin vitamin and supplement regimes with the goal of losing weight, but as they increase their level of fitness and their workouts grow in intensity they can expand into additional categories of products that support this increased activity, such as products that provide energy for workouts, products to help build muscle and products to help them better recover from their workouts. Indeed, weight loss can be a "gateway" to other wellness goals — supported by additional products — down the road.

The third most-cited wellness goal is related to mental, rather than physical health. Approximately 28% of those surveyed named cognitive function as a wellness goal they support with vitamins and supplements. These consumers often use products either to enhance mental performance or improve focus in today's world of myriad distractions, or else to prevent the onset of mental health issues that can come with aging. "I take a cocktail of vitamins as a preventive measure recommended by my doctor to help against Alzheimer's, as my mother has the disease," said one respondent.

Pills are still the preferred method of 62% of vitamin and supplement users, according to the survey. Gummies, a relatively new form of delivery, are used by 9.9%, just slightly above drinks (9.7%) and powders (7.9%).

"We have seen a growing skew between men and women on this front," said Paul Jarrett, CEO and co-founder of Bulu Box, an online retailer of diet, vitamin and sports nutrition products that offers a subscription box program through which members can try sample-sized products and then purchase full-size versions online. "Based on the conversion rates of our subscribers, we are seeing that while men tend to be OK with taking a pill, women are becoming much more interested in consuming their vitamins and supplements in the form of snacks."

Information, please

Shoppers of diet, vitamin and sports nutrition products are extremely hungry for information, and seek content about product functionality and efficacy from a variety of sources. While two-thirds (64%) of respondents get their diet, vitamin and supplement information online, print media is certainly not dead — approximately 42% say they get this information from magazines and 22% from books. In-person recommendations also are influential among HellaWella visitors, with 41% saying they get their vitamin and supplement information from an expert, such as a physician or personal trainer, while 37% follow the advice of their peers and word of mouth.

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Interestingly, while websites were by far the most popular platform for information, social media ranked low on the list, with only 16% of respondents turning to platforms like Facebook for their information on vitamins and supplements. However, according to Bulu Box's Jarrett, it's likely that discussions of these products are taking place on social media within the context of health-and-fitness discussions. "The best 'buzz' we get in the category via social media is by focusing on fitness, not vitamins and supplements per se," he said. "Nobody is going to tweet about your fish oil."

However, one growing digital platform consumers are turning to for such fitness information are mobile apps, according to Brad Nix, a partner with New York-based social media analytics firm Brand Chorus. "There are more than 40,000-plus health apps in use today," he said. "The health app industry is growing 87% faster than the entire mobile app industry, and it's expected to quadruple by 2016."

These apps, along with wearable devices that can measure everything from heart rate to steps taken, calories burned and distance traveled, can incorporate additional information about diet, vitamin and supplement intake to enable users to track their overall progress online and measure their effectiveness.

Bricks and clicks

While most of those surveyed get their diet, vitamin and sports nutrition information online, where they actually purchase these products is pretty evenly split among retail channels and classes of trade. Just over 20% say they purchase these products online, while just under 20% buy them from big-box or discount stores. Specialty health stores and drug stores were virtually neck and neck at 16.85% and 16%, respectively, while only 12% named the grocery channel as their source for these products.

However, when they do purchase vitamins and supplements, they tend to purchase several. Half said they typically buy between two and three items during one shopping trip, and almost 10% buy four or more of them. One way to encourage shoppers to build their vitamin and supplement basket, according to Bulu Box's Jarrett, is by bundling complementary products together under specific health-related themes.

"For example, we bundle several related products together under the weight loss theme," said Jarrett. "It includes a 15 Day Cleanse, 24/7 Weight Loss Kit, Lean Protein, a Blender Bottle plus a quick reference guide for using these products together. They are grouped together under one SKU."

Ingredients, functionality rule

Package design and brand name take a back seat to ingredient listing and functionality claims when it comes to influencing the health-minded consumer's decision to buy diet, vitamin and sports nutrition products. This is consistent with how these same shoppers reported shopping for food (See the ECRM/HellaWella study on health food shoppers in the October 19 issue of *DSN*, page 24). Information about what's in the package and how it contributes to overall health are far more influential on the purchase than sleek packaging or what supplier manufactures the product.

More than 85% of respondents cited ingredient listing and 58% named functionality claims as "very important," compared with 18% for brand and just 4% for package design. Price and user ratings were also key factors in purchase decisions of these products, each ranked as "very important" by more than one-third of respondents. "As I become more informed, I pay more attention to the ingredients in the vitamins and supplements I buy," said one respondent. "What's in the supplement is more important than price or appearance."

More than 82% of survey respondents cited health maintenance and immunity as the top wellness goals they supported with vitamins and supplements.